

Message Text

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FOLLOWING TELEGRAM FROM TEL AVIV DATED FEBRUARY 7, 1978
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 1745

E. O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PDEV PBOR IS EG
SUBJ: RETROSPECTIVE ON GOI SETTLEMENT DECISION-MAKING

1. SUMMARY: THE ACCELERATION OF SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY IN THE
RAFAH APPROACHES IN EARLY JANUARY WAS THE RESULT OF A DELIB-
BERATE DECISION BY THE CABINET. THE MOTIVATING FACTORS IN THIS
DECISION WERE (A) SHARON'S PERSUASIVE PROPOSAL THAT A BUFFER
ZONE OF SETTLEMENTS AND INTENSELY CULTIVATED FIELDS WAS
NECESSARY TO ISOLATE GAZA FROM ANY ELEMENT LIKELY TO BE
INTERESTED IN REKINDLING TERROR IN THE STRIP; AND (B) A
DESIRE TO DEFUSE DOMESTIC CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT'S
PEACE PROPOSALS. THE DECISION WAS BASED ON A TOTAL MISCAL-
CULATION BY THE CABINET OF THE LIKELY EGYPTIAN REACTION.
WHEN ITS ERROR OF JUDGMENT BECAME APPARENT, THE GOI'S GESTURE
TO MODIFY ITS SETTLEMENT POLICY WAS TO TERM NEW SETTLEMENT
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ACTIVITY IN RAFAH THE "STRENGTHENING" OF "THICKENING" OF
EXISTING SETTLEMENTS. IN ANY CASE, THE ISRAELI BUDGET FOR
FISCAL YEAR 1978/79 (BEGINNING APRIL 1) INCLUDES FUNDS FOR 11
NEW SETTLEMENTS BEYOND THE GREEN LINE -- FIVE IN THE RAFAH
APPROACHES AND SINAI, THREE ON THE GOLAN, AND THREE ON THE
WEST BANK. END SUMMARY

2. THE ACCELERATION OF SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY IN THE RAFAH
APPROACHES PLAYED A LARGE PART IN POISONING THE ATMOSPHERE
DURING THE ACTIVE PHASE OF DIRECT ISRAELI-EGYPTIAN NEGO-

TIATIONS IN JANUARY. TO EGYPTIANS, SUCH ACTIVITIES NOT ONLY CASE DOUBT ON THE SERIOUSNESS OF PM BEGIN'S PROPOSAL TO RETURN ALL SINAI TO EGYPTIAN SOVEREIGNTY, BUT ALSO ON THE ISRAELIS' TRUE INTENTIONS IN THE NEGOTIATIONS. GOI WAS ACCUSED OF WANTING "LAND AS WELL AS PEACE." FOR ITS PART, GOI FAILED TO PROVIDE LOGIC UNDERLYING ITS DECISION TO "STRENGTHEN" SETTLEMENTS IN RAFAH AT THE VERY TIME WHEN DIFFICULT NEGOTIATIONS WITH EGYPT WERE BEGINNING. SOME ISRAELI OBSERVERS SUGGESTED THAT THE SETTLEMENT ACITIVITES WERE A CONSCIOUS EFFORT BY GOI TO PLACATE DOMESTIC CRITICISM OF ITS PEACE PROPOSALS AND/OR ESTABLISH AN ADDITIONAL BARGAINING CHIP FOR THE NEGOTIATIONS WITH EGYPT. OTHERS CLAIMED AGRICULTURE MINISTER SHARON EXCEEDED CABINET INSTRUCTIONS AND ORDERED THE BULLDOZERS INTO ACTION ON HIS OWN. RECENT DISCUSSIONS BY EMBOFFS WITH SEVERAL SENIOR ISRAELI OFFICIALS HAVE FILLED IN SOME OF THE MISSING PIECES OF THIS EPISODE, AND WE FEEL THAT A REVIEW OF THE GOI'S DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN THE AFFAIR WILL CAST SOME LIGHT ON ITS OPERATION.

3. AS WE RECONSTRUCT THE COURSE OF EVENTS, THE SUBJECT OF THE FUTURE OF THE RAFAH APPROACHES CAME UP IN THE COURSE OF THE CABINET DELIBERATIONS PRECEDING BEGIN'S TRIP TO ISMAILIYA IN LATE DECEMBER. THERE WAS A CONSENSUS THAT ISRAEL MUST HOLD CONFIDENTIAL

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THE RAFAH AREA FOR SECURITY REASONS. DEFMIN WEIZMAN STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EITAM AIRFIELD SOUTH OF YAMIT AND CONSIDERED THE SETTLEMENTS IN THE AREA OF MINOR SIGNIFICANCE. SHARON, ON THE OTHER HAND, EMPHASIZED THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY VALUE OF SETTLEMENTS AND INTENSE AGRICULTURAL CULTIVATION IN THE APPROACHES (SEE SEPTTEL ON SHARON AND THE SINAI SETTLEMENTS). ACCORDING TO HIS CONCEPT, A 40 KM. BUFFER ZONE OF SETTLEMENTS AND FIELDS WERE NECESSARY TO ISOLATE GAZA FROM ANY ELEMENTS LIKELY TO BE INTERESTED IN REKINDLING TERROR IN THE STRIP. IN LINE WITH THIS CONCEPT, SHARON PROPOSED A CRASH SETTLEMENT PROGRAM IN NORTHERN SINAI. HIS PROPOSAL MET WITH SOME OPPOSITION. DMC AND LIBERAL MINISTERS WERE UNCERTAIN THAT THIS WAS THE RIGHT TIME FOR SUCH A STEP. DEPUTY DEFMIN TZIPORI TOLD AN EMBOFF THAT HE HAD SPOKEN AGAINST SHARON'S PROPOSALS IN THE CABINET SESSIONS. CHIEF OF STAFF GUR SPOKE OUT PUBLICLY AT THIS TIME ON THE MILITARY IRRELEVANCE OF SETTLEMENTS IN THE CURRENT AGE OF WARFARE. DAYAN AND WEIZMAN FAVORED THE PROPOSAL. THE KEY FIGURE, BEGIN, RESPECTED SHARON'S TALENTS AND ALSO SUPPORTED THE PROPOSAL. DEPUTY PM YADIN LATER TOLD AN EMBOFF THAT DOMESTIC CONSIDERATIONS -- DEFUSING CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PEACE PROPOSALS -- ALSO MOTIVATED QUITE A FEW MINISTERS. AS A RESULT, SHARON'S SECURITY CONCEPTION CARRIED THE DAY, AND THE CABINET APPROVED A CRASH SETTLEMENT PROGRAM IN NORTHERN SINAI. HOWEVER, SINCE BEGIN WAS SOON TO TRAVEL TO ISMAILIYA TO MEET WITH SADAT, THE DECISION TO SEND THE BULLDOZERS (WHICH WERE ALREADY ON THE SPOT) INTO ACTION WAS POSTPONED UNTIL THE PM'S

RETUTN.

4.

ZEETNZWUNMGE FIRST WEEK OF JANUARY, THE CABINET HEARD DMC AND LIBERAL MINISTERS, WHO HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN RELUCTANT TO OPPOSE SHARON, COME OUT AGAINST ANY NEW SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY IN RAFAH AT THAT TIME BECAUSE IT WOULD UNDERMINE THE NEGOTIATIONS WITH EGYPT AND HARM ISRAEL'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE. NONETHELESS, THE CABINET AGAIN VOTED TO FLESH OUT CONFIDENTIAL

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OUT THE SETTLEMENTS FROM RAFAH TO EL ARISH. DURING THE SAME PERIOD THE CABINET REJECTED ANOTHER SHARON PROPOSAL TO SETP UP SETTLEMENT THROUGHOUT THE WEST BANK. IT DID, HOWEVER, ADOPT A LESS AMBITIOUS PROPOSAL TO ESTABLISH FOUR NEW SETTLEMENTS. AT THIS POINT THE DMC PUSHED FOR THE WEST BANK SETTLEMENT ISSUE TO BE DECIDED IN THE KNESSET FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY COMMITTEE.

5. MEANWHILE, WITH BEGIN AND A CABINET MAJORITY BEHIND HIM, SHARON INSTRUCTED THE JEWISH NATIONAL FUND TO HAVE ITS BULLDOZERS BEGIN GROUND-LEVELLING IN RAFAH ON JAN 4 (TEL AVIV 179). WORKING CLOSELY WITH SHARON WAS JEWISHHAGENCY/WORLD ZIONIST ORGANIZATION SETTLEMENT DEPARTMENT CHAIRMAN RA'ANAN WEITZ. ALTHOUGH DOVISH ON SETTLEMENT IN POPULATED ARAB AREAS OF THE WEST BANK, WEITZ AGREED WITH SHARON THAT A BARRIER OF JEWISH SETTLEMENTS IN THE RAFAH APPROACHES WAS A SINE QUA NON FOR THE DEMILITARIZATION OF THE GAZA STRIP.

6. UNEXPECTEDLY HEAVY MEDIA ATTENTION TO THE SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY AND INCREASING EGYPTIAN AND INTERNATIONAL CRITICISM GAVE THE CABINET SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT THEIR DECISION (TEL AVIV 259). AT A HEATED JAN 8 SESSION, DMC AND LIBERAL MINISTERS ACCUSED SHARON OF EXCEEDING INSTRUCTIONS BY PREPARING LAND FOR TWENTY NEW SETTLEMENTS, WHILE HE DEFENDED HIMSELF BY POINTING TO EARLIER CABINET DECISIONS TO FLESH OUT EXISTING SETTLEMENTS AND PREPARE LAND FOR NEW SETTLEMENTS. SHARON REJECTED ATTEMPTS TO MAKE HIM INTO A SCAPEGOAT AND ARGUED THAT HIS ACTIONS WERE CONSISTENT WITH CABINET INSTRUCTIONS. NONETHELESS, THE CABINET ISSUED A STATEMENT AFTER THE SESSION ASSERTING THAT EXISTING SETTLEMENTS WOULD BE STRENGTHENED BUT NO NEW SETTLEMENTS WOULD BE ESTABLISHED IN RAFAH. IN ADDITION, THE CABINET VOTED NOT TO INCLUDE SHARON IN THE GOI DEL TO THE JERUSALEM POL CONFERENCE (TEL AVIV 414). IT WAS CONFIDENTIAL

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AGAINST THIS BACKDROP THAT SHARON CRITICIZED THE CABINET FOR HAVING A WEAK SETTLEMENT POLICY AT THE JAN 8 MEETING OF THE HERUT PARTY CENTRAL COMMITTEE.

7. NOTWITHSTANDING THE HEAVY CRITICISM AT THE JAN 8 CABINET SESSION, SHARON CONTINUED TO HAVE A CABINET MAJORITY BEHIND HIS SETTLEMENT ACTIVITIES. ON JAN 10, ADDITIONAL GROUND PREPARATION BEGAN NEAR ABU AGEILA, SOUTH OF EL ARISH (TEL AVIV 476). MEANWHILE, SHARON CONTINUED TO BE ACCUSED BY SOME MKS AND THE MEDIA OF IMPLEMENTING HIS OWN SETTLEMENT POLICY. GALLED THAT HE HAD BECOME THE SCAPEGOAT FOR WHAT HE CONTENTED WAS REALLY A CABINET DECISION, SHARON PRIVATELY DEMANDED THAT BEGIN GIVE HIM A PUBLIC VOTE OF CONFIDENCE. AS A RESULT, THE PM'S OFFICE ANNOUNCED ON JAN 13 THAT SHARON WAS IMPLEMENTING THE CABINET'S DECISIONS, AND THAT THERE WAS NO BASIS TO CLAIMS SHARON WAS ACTING ON HIS OWN INITIATIVE IN RAFAH OR ANY OTHER AREA.

8. COMMENT: THE CABINET MADE A DELIBERATE DECISION TO IMPLEMENT A CRASH SETTLEMENT PROGRAM IN THE RAFAH APPROACHES. THE MOTIVATING FACTORS IN THIS DECISION WERE (A) SHARON'S HEAVY INFLUENCE WITHIN THE CABINET ON SECURITY ISSUES, AND (B) THE CABINET'S DESIRE TO PLACATE DOMESTIC CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PEACE PROPOSALS. THE TIMING OF THE DECISION WAS NOT AIMED AT THE EGYPTIANS. YADIN RECENTLY GLUMLY ADMITTED TO EMBOFF THAT THE CABINET SOMEHOW THOUGHT THE BULLDOZER ACTIVITY COULD BE CARRIED OUT QUIETLY AND WITHOUT DISTURBING THE EGYPTIANS WHILE AT THE SAME TIME BEING KNOWN TO AND APPLAUDED BY PRO-SETTLEMENT ISRAELIS.

9. SUBSEQUENT ACTIONS CAST DOUBT ON WHETHER THE GOI HAS LEARNED THE LESSON THAT NEW SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY AND NEGOTIATIONS WITH EGYPT DO NOT GO TOGETHER. ACCORDING TO CANADIAN EMBOFFS, AS OF FEB 1, GROUND LEVELLING WAS BEING CARRIED OUT AT SITES NEAR ABU AGEILA. THEY ALSO NOTED GROUND WORK AT SITES ON COAST EAST OF HARUVIT. IN
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ADDITION, CANADIANS OBSERVED EXTENSIVE FENCING EFFORT AT HARUVIT WHICH IN EFFECT EXTENDED SIZE OF SETTLEMENT. (COMMENT: THIS WOULD ALSO STOP FREE MOVEMENT AND SQUATTING BY BEDOUIN.) WE PLAN TO DO OUR OWN RECON OF RAFAH AREA WITHIN NEXT FEW DAYS.

10. IN LOOKING TOWARD FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS, WE NOTE THAT GOI BUDGET FOR FISCAL YEAR 1978/79 INCLUDES FUNDS FOR 11 NEW SETTLEMENTS BEYOND THE GREEN LINE -- FIVE IN THE RAFAH APPROACHES AND SINAI, THREE ON THE WEST BANK, AND THREE ON THE GOLAN (AIRGRAM TO FOLLOW). DESPITE THE MISCALCULATIONS OF JAN, THE ONLY GOI MODIFICATION OF ITS SETTLEMENT POLICY APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN TO TERM NEW SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY IN THE RAFAH APPROACHES THE "STRENGTHENING" OR "THICKENING" OF EXISTING SETTLEMENTS. LEWIS UNQUOTE VANCE

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